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Honors Thesis

Authored Portraits: Documenting Interracial Couples

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May 2, 2012

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Abstract

Richard Avedon's technique of portraiture has come to be known as "authored portraits." The intent behind every portrait Avedon created was to capture something different about the subject from how they normally portrayed themselves, something more intimate. My project follows in the footsteps of his techniques while adding ideas taken from the work of another photographer, Taryn Simon. Simon's work is always done in a series centered on a specific concept. She then combines each image with a brief explanatory text. My final exhibition of images will consist of a series of portraits of interracial couples paired with brief biographical texts.

This thesis project has been inspired and modeled after the styles of two very different photographers: Richard Avedon and Taryn Simon. Researching their work was the catalyst that inspired my own project; leading me to create a series of work utilizing techniques gleaned from both individual's distinctive works.

Richard Avedon was one of the great portrait and fashion photographers of the past century. His work has become a cultural staple similar to the art of Andy Warhol. Avedon literally photographed everybody who was anybody; it was considered by many as a sign of acceptance into the American culture of fame when he photographed them. The film *Funny Face* starring Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire is based somewhat on Richard Avedon. However, it was not simply the sheer impressive caliber of his portfolio that brought him to this forefront of cultural attention.

Avedon had a unique and provocative style, a way of controlling and isolating his subjects, capturing something that others often did not. He always endeavored to dig beyond the mask of success and fame, portraying something unique, something that seemed more genuine about the individual. This is quite evident in his famous photo of Marilyn Monroe. The normal image one sees of Monroe generally consists of her flashing her timeless coy smile towards the camera. However, in Avedon's portrait she appears isolated, unsure, confused, almost as if she is a lost child.

To get images like the one of Monroe, Avedon relied on candid moments and interesting techniques engineered to obtain a reaction from his subjects. A striking example of his unusual techniques is when he purposely arrived several minutes late to a portrait session with the avid dog loving Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Upon arriving

on set he apologized for his late arrival and then lied, explaining that his car had hit a dog in route.

Avedon also often chose extremely candid shots as his final selections. Charlie Chaplin had a portrait session done by Avedon just before fleeing the country during the era of Senator McCarthy. At the very end of the session, Avedon was starting to wrap up the set and Chaplin instructed him to take one more photo. Chaplin then bent his head forward stuck his fingers above his head like demon horns and then raised his head quickly, smiling comically towards the camera. This image ended up being the one Avedon chose.

Beyond simply the techniques, Avedon used a consistent aesthetic, normally placing his subject against a white backdrop. This isolated them and fully made them the center of focus. His controlling style and efforts to portray subjects in a unique way has been termed as “authored portraits.” This style has been mimicked by many other well-known photographers and has come to be an integral aspect in the well-known work of such celebrity photographers as Annie Liebovitz and Jill Greenberg.

The more conceptual nature of my project has been inspired by the work of Taryn Simon, a fine art photographer who has showed at various museums throughout the world and has given a lecture at the prestigious TED conference. Her work is all about making statements—although often vague—about society and culture as a whole. The best examples of her work are two series entitled *The Innocents* and *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*.

In *The Innocents*, Simon displays photographs she has taken of individuals who were wrongly convicted of murder or rape charges, later being exonerated by DNA

evidence. *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* consists of photographs of things that the average citizen is likely unaware of. She includes images of a nuclear waste facility, a contraband room at a U.S Customs and Border Protection facility, and a Cryopreservation Unit to name just a few. With her images Simon always includes a brief text—devoid of opinion—explaining the significance of each image. Her desire is to cause the viewer to think about the images and concepts, processing them for themselves.

As stated earlier, utilizing techniques from both photographers, I crafted my own unique conceptual project centering on the theme of interracial relationships. Using Avedon's style of Authored Portraits I combined his aesthetics with the conceptual format of Simon's work also including brief text with each image. The specific theme of interracial relationships was chosen as reaction to my own experience growing up in the diversity community of Berrien Springs. In my observation, ideas of race are things educated into each of us. Fortunately, I have grown up in a community that is far more open-minded than many areas of the world. In my work, I wanted to showcase this specific beautiful aspect of our community.

Thus, for my project I conducted a number of candid portrait sessions with interracial couples from the community. Prior to shooting the portraits I practiced my shooting methods on friends, perfecting my techniques. Then, I proceeded to contact my actual subjects. From the beginning I intended to showcase a wide variety of couples in my final exhibition. In contacting couples I endeavored to connect with some couples who were older, some who were younger, some who had been together for many years,

and some who had just recently started dating. This choice I felt would add dimension and layers of interest to the final work.

During the sessions with the various couples I worked with them in the studio, utilizing a plain background and a uniform lighting set-up. The individuals were directed to wear specific monochromatic clothing, ensuring that the portraits were somewhat uniform and focused the viewer's attention on the subjects, not their clothing. I used Capture One software and shot with live capture directly to a computer monitor. This process allowed me to carry out the photo-shoot without standing behind the camera. Instead I was able to stand next to the monitor close to my subjects, carrying on a casual but directed conversation with them. We would discuss issues such as how they first met, how long they had been together and various aspects of their relationship. This was all in an attempt to get a very comfortable and natural image of them, hopefully conveying something more intimate about them and their relationship.

After the session I requested each couple to fill out a brief questionnaire, just answering some basic biographical questions about their relationship. This information was then included with the images when they were exhibited, in following with the format of Taryn Simon.

In post-production I carefully went through each image from the shoot, rating the ones that stood out. My intent was to select images that were representative of my interaction with each couple, intending to portray something about their personalities. After narrowing down and making a final selection, I then made some cosmetic edits in Adobe Photoshop such as cropping and color correction. Right before printing I also made the decision to place aging textures over each image, giving them a different feel.

This decision was based on my intent to convey modern couples in an obviously modern way—using edgy lighting—however, I want to convey a sense of the unsettling history associated with interracial relationships and their acceptance by society. When the whole process of shooting, selecting, and editing was completed, I printed, matted, and framed my images. There were ten in total—each combined with a brief paragraph. My final images were put on display in the Jean-Marie Gallery in Harrigan Hall where an opening reception was also held.

Artist Statement

Race is an arbitrary term that is difficult to define in a precise and concise way. It is a construct, created by humanity in order to classify people into distinguishable groups. At some point the creation of these races confused us, making us think there was something very different about us; not merely our appearances.

Growing up in a diverse community such as Berrien Springs—my home village—simplifies the overcomplicated view the majority of American society has in regards to race. A friend of mine once remarked that he never even understood that his best friend was black until someone explained it to him in sixth grade.

These ideas of difference are not inherent to our understanding of the world but instead are things that we are educated to believe.

This body of work is an exploration into these tensions, the intersections between culture, humanity, love, and unity. Each of these couples has a unique story. Some have experienced tensions because of their relationships. Many have only experienced complete acceptance from their family and friends. All have moved past the misconceptions society has often nourished, providing hope for a more perfect future.

Love.

Jason James Lemon



Breana Soliday and Kasper Haughton Jr. have been “together” for about 2 months. They first met while attending church at One Place—also 2 months ago. A mutual friend introduced them and very quickly they realized they were a good match for each other. In the beginning they dealt with concerns from Breana’s parents regarding problems they fear Breana and Kasper may encounter.



Phemie and Stanley Maxwell are married and first met 21 years ago in China. They were both on vacation at the time. There have been some internal tensions with their relationship surrounding cultural differences; mostly over holidays and sometimes food, but they feel these issues are usually comical in retrospect.



Vimmie Magsino and Ivan Labianca have been “in love” for approximately a year and a half. They first met in a class they had together and then spent time together in Jordan. While in Jordan Ivan asked Vimmie to have tea with him. They spent time together as friends for awhile and then eventually became a couple by proxy. Neither really ever think of their relationships as being “interracial.”



Joel Barrett and David Seymour have been happily partnered for 6 years. They first met at the Daily Grind, a coffee shop which Joel used to manage. David decided to try the coffee at the shop and Joel immediately made his intentions known when they met. About 3 months later they went on their first date. Due to many other factors surrounding their relationship, race plays a very small role in any tensions they may experience from others.



Nina Marie Rambo and Timothy Girod have been together for close to 2 years. They first met in highschool while taking a design class together. Sometimes they experience tensions in regards to their relationship through sly jokes from friends. However, the much bigger issue is racism on both sides of Nina's family. Fortunately, things are getting much better as time goes on.



Becky and Japhet De Oliveira have been together for 19 years and married for 17. They first met in 1993 at Newbold College in England while they were students in the same class. Japhet introduced himself by telling her that her shoes were ugly. They have experienced some tensions from Japhet's family due to differences in race and culture but otherwise they have not.



Tiffany Evering and Jeremy Burton have been in a steady relationship for a little over a year. They originally met at Andrews University between Chan Shun and Nethery Hall. Their mutual friend Krystal introduced them by telling Jeremy that Tiffany was “crazy” and that he shouldn’t talk to her. Jeremy’s grandmother has some reservations about their relationship but otherwise their family has all been very supportive.



Tori Meyer and Jay Kijai have been dating/lovers for 2 and a half years and are possibly about to elope to Italy. They met in an art class in 2009 when Tori bought him a dinosaur shaped cookie for his birthday. They have never experienced any tensions because of their interracial relationship.



Raquel de Leon Rosenberg and Ray Rosenberg have been married for four years. They originally met in 2006 at the clinic Raquel worked at in Coloma, MI. Ray was a patient and Raquel was his nurse practitioner. Neither of them have experienced any tensions because of their interracial relationship. All of their friends and family have been very accepting of their relationship.



Katrinna Simbaku and Jamal Revolus have been dating for almost 6 months. They first met at the Andrews University Student Center during the fall semester of 2010 and were introduced by a mutual friend. They feel that attending Andrews University has kept them in an environment free from tensions that may normally surround interracial relationships.

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